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ABSTRACT

Two national surveys on graduation requirements and transition services for students with handicaps are briefly described. The first study, "State Graduation Policies and Program Practices Related to High School Special Education Programs" by Joanne Records Bodner et al., surveyed state special education directors or their designees in 50 states and the District of Columbia. The study found that 36 states have increased academic requirements for high school graduation since 1975; most states allow either modified content or modified instruction within regular classes as a means of meeting the requirements. In addition, 21 states require a minimum competency test for graduation, and of these, 15 determine students' exit documents on the basis of test scores. The second survey, "Do We Know Enough to Plan for Transition?" by John McDonnell et al., involved administrators of 44 state education agencies, 34 administrators of state vocational programs, and 35 administrators of residential programs for adults with severe handicaps. This survey found that projected need for services for severely handicapped students exceeded projected service increases. Policy recommendations are made based on the results of these studies. (JDD)

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ERIC/OSEP SPECIAL PROJECT ON INTERAGENCY INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

RESEARCH & RESOURCES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT 19
OCTOBER 1988

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS, ADULT SERVICES, AND THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH HANDICAPS

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In their efforts to ease the transition from education to community and working life for handicapped students, educators have encountered a number of obstacles. The trend toward increased academic requirements and competency testing for high school graduation can create competition between academic subjects and education in the functional skills that are needed for independent community living. Further, when students complete a more functional high school curriculum in accordance with their IEPs, some states award special diplomas or certificates rather than the regular high school diploma. This differentiates students with handicaps from the norm group and can limit employment options.

After graduation, students are likely to encounter an inadequate number and range of vocational and residential placements. The data required for adequate planning—number of students graduating each year, number of persons leaving institutions, the types of services they will require, length of waiting lists and projected increases in available placements—have been available in only a few states, and where the data have been available, there have been no mechanisms for sharing the information with all agencies who need it.

These issues were addressed by two national surveys. *State Graduation Policies and Program Practices Related to High School Special Education Programs*, by Joanne Records Bodner, Gary M. Clark, and Daryl F. Mellard, discusses increased academic requirements, competency testing, and the types of diplomas awarded to special education graduates. The second survey, *Do We Know Enough to Plan for Transition?*, by John McDonnell, Barbara Wilcox, Shawn Bowles and G. Thomas Bellamy, reports a survey of state agencies responsible for services to persons with severe handicaps.

METHOD

In the first survey, a two-part questionnaire was used. Section I of the survey, which was completed by state special education directors, asked their perceptions of the importance of current secondary special education program practices and the degree of emphasis states have placed on these practices. Section II requested factual information about graduation policies, transitional programs and services, and related teacher preparation programs. Section II was completed either by the state special education director or by a designee. Although all 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to Section II, there were only 35 responses to Section I.

In the second survey, state administrators of educational, vocational, and residential service agencies were interviewed in a three-step process: initial contact was made by telephone, a questionnaire was mailed, and a structured telephone interview was conducted with an agency representative. All 50 states and the District of Columbia were asked to participate; responses were received from 44 state education agencies, 34 administrators of state vocational programs, and 35 administrators of residential programs for adults with severe handicaps. Participants were asked to provide the number of students with severe handicaps who were expected to graduate in school years 1984–1985, 1985–1986, and 1986–1987 and the residential and vocational services required and available in those years.

RESULTS

The first survey found that 36 states have increased academic requirements since 1975, when P.L. 94–142 was passed. In most states, these increases are still being phased in, and their full implications for special education students are unknown. Allowances for special education students in meeting these requirements are made in 36 states; most allow either modified content or modified instruction within regular classes. Only 19 allow special education students to take classes with both different content and different instruction as a means of meeting the requirements.

In addition, 21 states require a minimum competency test for graduation (others require the test, but use the results for other purposes). Of these, 15 determine students' exit documents on the basis of test scores. Specific policies regulating administration of the test to special education students are in effect in 22 states, providing for administration in small groups, extended time limits, or administration by the special education teacher.

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For students who do not meet regular graduation requirements, 17 states require different exit documents. In 14 states, state policies require that one exit document be awarded to all students whether they meet regular or alternative requirements. In 19 states, the type of diploma awarded is determined by the local districts.

After graduation, transition to community life is supported by formal state-level agreements with vocational education and vocational rehabilitation departments in 39 states. Although 39 states reported having a staff person responsible for transition, these responsibilities are full time in only 9 states.

The second survey found that 22 state educational programs (50% of respondents) were able to provide actual counts of the number of severely handicapped students expected to graduate in each of the 3 years for which data were requested. For vocational programs, 31 states (91% of respondents) had substantial waiting lists, although a few states projected increases in vocational placements for following years. Substantial waiting lists for residential services existed in 34 states (97% of respondents). Projected need exceeded projected increases by numbers ranging across states from 112 to 1,165 placements each year between 1984 and 1986. These figures represent a critical shortage of adult services. Such shortages hinder the adjustment of individuals with severe handicaps to life in the community and place an undue burden on their families.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of state graduation policies and high school program practices made the following policy recommendations:

- State legislators and local boards of education should assign study groups to investigate the impact of increased academic requirements on special education students.
- Special educators should advocate more individualization in curriculum, instruction, and performance criteria within graduation policies.
- Policymakers who determine exit documents should ensure that they provide equitable opportunities for postsecondary education or employment.
- Formal and informal interagency agreements should be developed at the state level to emphasize the importance of cooperation between special education personnel and adult services providers. State agencies should advocate for funds to provide incentives for local agencies to develop local agreements.
- Transitional programming should not be limited to services but should include instruction in transitional skills that will enable students to be more independent after high school. IEPs should include transitional goals beginning when the student is young and continuing through high school.

The policy recommendations developed by the study of state service agencies include:

- States should implement systems to track variables relevant to service planning.
- The array of vocational and residential service options should be expanded: current programs need to be enlarged or new service program formats created.
- Careful planning is required to minimize competition for services between school graduates and those leaving institutions. Planners should address the distinct needs of each group.

State Graduation Policies and Program Practices Related to High School Special Education Programs. November 1987. 64 pp. Joanne Records Bodner, Gary M. Clark and Daryl F. Mellard. U.S. Department of Education Grant No. G008530217. Available for $.82 (microfiche) or $5.82 (hard copy), plus postage, from ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304 (1-800-227-3742). Order number ED 294 347.

Do We Know Enough to Plan for Transition? A National Survey of State Agencies Responsible for Services to Persons with Severe Handicaps. Spring 1986. John McDonnell, Barbara Wilcox, Shawn Bowles, and G. Thomas Bellamy. Published in *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, v. 11, n. 1, pp. 53–60. U.S. Department of Education Grant No. G008302159.

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